

Conclusions: Toward a System of Early Childhood Care

Examining federal policies that affect the social and emotional development of young children and their readiness for school is not new. In the 1990s there were a number of landmark reports. Examples include the following:

Beyond Rhetoric: The Report of the National Commission on Children (1991) recommended “changes in the organization, administration, implementation and budget of programs at all levels of government to encourage a more collaborative and comprehensive service delivery system” (p. 81). Specific suggestions included coordination of child policies within the executive branch, creation of a joint congressional committee on children and families to coordinate across authorizing and appropriating committees, decategorizing federal programs to encourage cohesion and flexibility in children’s programs, uniform eligibility criteria, incentives for coordination at the local level, accountability measures that focus on child well-being, increased investment in prevention, and increased salaries and training for early childhood and child welfare workers coupled with incentives for demonstrated competence.

Heart Start in 1992 found that “though familiarity with letters and numbers and a broad vocabulary is helpful, a specific set of social and emotional characteristics is even more basic to school readiness” (p. 1). The report recommended universal health care coverage, the integration of health and child care knowledge, paid parental leave, stronger federal standards for child care, higher wages for child care workers, continuity of caregivers, parent education and family resource programs, an adequate standard of living, and community-based integrated services for young children with more severe needs.

Goals 2000, Educate America Act (DOE, 1994) placed school readiness at the top of the agenda and cited the following three objectives to help children enter school ready to learn: (1) access to high quality and developmentally appropriate pre-school programs, (2) enabling every parent to be a child’s first teacher through access to the training and support parents need and (3) providing children with needed nutrition, physical activity, and health care, and reducing the number of low birthweight babies through improved prenatal care.

In April 1994, *Starting Points*, a report of the Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children, stated that “Our nation’s infants and toddlers and their families are in trouble” (p. xiii). David Hamburg, Carnegie Corporation president, declared that “In the United States . . . the crucially formative years of early childhood have become a time of peril and loss for millions of children and their families” (p. vii). The Carnegie Task Force concluded that action was needed in the following four areas: promoting responsible parenthood, guaranteeing quality child care choices, ensuring good health and protection for young children, and mobilizing communities to support young children and their families. Specific recommendations included expanding community-based parent education and support programs for families with infants and toddlers; strengthening the FMLA of 1993 by expanding coverage to employers of under fifty

workers, and providing partial wage replacement; increasing federal investments in quality and affordable child care; making the DCTC refundable for some families; offering training and improved salary for child care workers; home visiting to first time parents; expanding WIC; expanding parent education and parent support programs; creating family and child centers; expanding Head Start to infants and toddlers; creating a high level federal coordinating mechanism; and calling upon leaders in the public and private sectors to work together to ensure that children under three years of age receive the care and protection they need and deserve.

Years of Promise (1996), a report of the Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades, examined all the forces that contribute to children's learning and development from three to ten years of age. It recommended a five-point program that included (1) promoting children's learning in families and communities by providing parent education and support programs, (2) a commitment to high quality public and private early care and education programs for children ages three through five supported through coordinated financing, (3) creating effective elementary schools and school systems, (4) promoting high quality children's television and electronic media, and (5) linking the key learning institutions into a comprehensive, coordinated education system. It urged more public financing to improve the quality and availability of early care and education.

Although focused on children of older age groups, other studies also contribute important lessons to inform this discussion. Findings from the Robert Wood Johnson Mental Health Services Program for Youth cautioned that barriers to service integration at the local level are formidable, and the Casey New Futures Program recommended finding the path of least resistance for meaningful systems change.

So this report is not alone in recommending a new course of action. The efforts of many colleagues, the lessons they have learned, and the recommendations they have made help to inform the ongoing process of promoting young children's social and emotional development and preparing children for school readiness.

What Is the Current State of Affairs?

This paper's review of selected federal policies that affect the social and emotional development of young children and their readiness for school has identified both opportunities and challenges within the system. The study has examined individual policies within the five domains of child health, early childhood care and education, family support and child welfare, nutrition, and socioeconomic status and has made recommendations for change within each domain. The purpose of this section is to highlight issues that cross policy domains and to make recommendations to address them.

Opportunities Exist

First, it is apparent from this review that the federal government is making a major contribution to the social and emotional development of young children and their families. Many of the policies discussed in this report articulate a commit-

ment to a federal responsibility for the well-being of America's children, and the federal government has made many advances over the past decade that improve the lives of young children and their families. The Medicaid expansions, the passage of CHIP, and demonstration programs such as Starting Early Starting Smart are examples of commitment to improving health and emotional development.

In the early childhood care and education area, the Early Head Start program has targeted the most important years from birth to age three for intervention. Part C of IDEA continues to provide early intervention services and, in addition, the early 1990s saw the extension of an entitlement to a free, appropriate public education to all eligible children ages three to five. In the family support and child welfare domain, the FMLA took a first step toward acknowledging the importance of parents' time with their young or sick children. The ASFA stressed the importance of a safe, secure, and stable environment for children.

Evidence of greater federal government awareness of the need for collaboration exists in increasing efforts to encourage better federal interagency coordination. There are a number of building blocks within the language of numerous federal policies. The MCHBG, Medicaid, and IDEA are just a few examples of policies that require coordination with other federal programs in the delivery of services to young children and their families. The government is directing cross-agency efforts at a number of critical issues ranging from program implementation to management information systems improvements and statistics projects.

The mental health and emotional development of children have received the attention of the president, the vice president, and their wives. The recently convened White House Conference on Mental Health included an acknowledgement that the emotional development and mental health of children are directly affected by early childhood experiences. The advances in neuroscience and infant brain development now support what child development experts have been saying for years. The integration of the science of early childhood has underscored the importance of young children's relationships with significant adults.

Some Challenges Exist

Recent changes in federal policies present challenges and raise unanswered questions about their impact on young children's social and emotional development and school readiness. Without question, PRWORA is one of the most influential policies passed in the 1990s. As discussed in this report, it has affected child policy across all five policy domains. The TANF program eliminated the entitlement to cash welfare benefits that existed under AFDC and established time limits and work requirements. PRWORA changed eligibility standards for SSI that eliminated some children from the program and made it more difficult for children to qualify. The legislation reduced the funding for quality initiatives and relaxed quality standards for child care services supported through the CCDBG. It also made changes that affected the eligibility of immigrant children and their families for TANF and other programs. The impact of these changes on young children is still largely unknown. However, there is the potential for some of the changes to result in stressful situations for parents and their young children that may increase developmental risk.

Some policies, while taking a step forward, may have mixed effects depending on implementation. For example, the option for states to create non-Medicaid CHIP programs allows states to offer a health insurance benefit package that may be less comprehensive than Medicaid and may bypass the EPSDT requirements. However, the flexibility may free states to create special innovative programs.

Other policies such as the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993 present challenges to the research community to develop appropriate outcomes measures of both child and family well being. Although these efforts may improve the effectiveness and quality of some programs, they may also provide challenges for programs whose benefits are hard to measure and document as the result of inadequate management information systems.

Issues in Creating a System of Early Childhood Care

1. First, as this study shows, early childhood issues cut across a number of different disciplines including but not limited to child development, mental health, education, child welfare, public health, nutrition, and economic security. Each system has its own culture, historical roots, values, and approaches. There are, however, commonly held beliefs about the importance of early relationships and their impact on emotional and social development, the influence of family socioeconomic status, and the importance of the cultural context.

Recommendations

- There is a need for the design and implementation of a seamless, multidisciplinary system of early childhood care that transcends traditional policy boundaries.
- There is a need for more opportunities for cross-discipline thinking and planning at all levels of government. Workers in each policy domain should have an awareness and appreciation for the roles and responsibilities of other personnel and agencies in the system.
- There is a need for demonstration programs to test new designs and implementation strategies that build on coordination mechanisms already existing in many federal policies. For example, some states are using models that employ generalists to coordinate policy at a systems level and information and referral at the individual level. There is a need for studies of their effectiveness using common methods and measures.
- There is a need for scheduling national conferences or professional meetings so that pre- or post-sessions might overlap and provide opportunities for multidisciplinary participation. This could facilitate contacts among policy makers and systems managers beyond their own domains and areas of expertise. The states should also replicate this multidisciplinary participation.

2. Existing policies are not fully implemented. The language of many federal policies articulates a commitment to elements essential to a coordinated system of early childhood care. However, the requirements often are not enforced. For example, the development of EPSDT and the sense from states that it was an “unfunded mandate” affected its implementation. Coordinating councils called for under IDEA, Part C do not consistently operate well across the states.

Recommendations

- There is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of existing coordination mechanisms at both the federal and state levels and to develop cross-domain best practices and opportunities for interactive exchange of ideas.
- There is a need to ensure that programs are implemented with fidelity to the original model. Therefore the individuals and agencies responsible for implementation should participate in the design and development of the program. There is a need for adequate resources for state level implementation and the development of incentives for state participation.

3. Federal or foundation-sponsored programs are not brought to scale. For example, although Head Start has expanded in the 1990s, it is still not funded at a level that allows service delivery to all eligible children or expansion to all children with similar risk-factor profiles.

In *Common Purpose*, Lisbeth Schorr (1997) discusses the practical aspects of policy implementation and bringing programs that do work to scale. She points out that foundations are becoming increasingly aware of the risk of overemphasizing innovation while underemphasizing the challenges of implementation on a large scale. Foundations have been addressing these issues through projects such as the Pew Charitable Trust and the Robert Wood Johnson initiative "Replication and Program Services, Inc.," as well as the Pew and Rockefeller Foundation's "Going to Scale" project.

Recommendations

- There is a need to increase commitment and efforts focusing on the replication of programs that have demonstrated effectiveness through rigorous research.
- There is a need to document and study the process as well as the structure of demonstration projects, including both facilitating factors and barriers to implementation. This is particularly important in light of devolution of responsibility, where the unique attributes of each state or local site require adaptation of implementation processes.

4. New federal policies often place additional responsibilities on fragile systems. Both the early childhood care and education system and the child protective services system exemplify this problem.

These systems must constantly adapt to changing realities. Two policy changes discussed in this paper illustrate this point. PRWORA revolutionized the public welfare system in this country. Changes to work requirements that were made through this legislation have had ramifications in a number of areas. No system has felt the impact more than early childhood care and education. PRWORA combined child care funding streams and did increase funding for child care by \$4 billion over six years. However, it simultaneously increased both the age of eligible children and the income eligibility requirements. These actions, along with new work requirements, created an increase in the demand for services challenging the system's flexibility by creating a need for increases in resources such as qualified staff and appropriate space. The legislation also reduced the quality set-aside and eliminated the language that required states to

pay market rates for child care slots. PRWORA also affected Head Start. The partial day, partial year nature of the Head Start program, as implemented in some areas, must change to support the needs of full-time working parents.

The ASFA significantly impacted the child protective services system by placing strict timelines on life altering decisions made on behalf of children. While meant to address system delays in establishing and implementing a permanent plan for children, the legislation may in fact result in the unintended consequence of clogging the system even further by imposing requirements that, of necessity, must rely on the courts. However, the Act did not address the long-term problems of training, technical assistance, and additional resources for an overburdened judicial system commensurate with the new deadlines and responsibilities.

Recommendations

- There is a need for an investment of resources to improve the status of the early childhood workforce. The child care, family support, and child protective systems especially need an infusion of resources to recruit sufficient numbers of qualified candidates, provide quality pre-service and in-service training, and create opportunities for cross-disciplinary learning, adequate compensation, excellent supervision, and incentives for encouraging high quality job performance.
- There is a need for enlisting institutions of higher education, especially those granting associate's and bachelor's degrees, to improve the education and practical experience of early childhood students and professionals.
- There is a need to enhance the motivation of early childhood workers to excel and continue to work in the field. Programs that highlight "unsung heroes," such as the Robert Wood Johnson Community Health Leadership Program, should be developed to recognize individuals in the early childhood field. Leadership awards and training institutes at both national and state levels should focus on nurturing those who work on behalf of young children and their families.

5. There is growing recognition that the knowledge base underlying the various early childhood disciplines and services has substantial common ground. The National Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Medicine have established a Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood that will be issuing its report in fall 2000. Findings in the fields of neuroscience and brain development are validating much of what social scientists and practitioners have realized over the years. Multidisciplinary research and the integration of knowledge are needed to continue progress in the early childhood field. Support for efforts to translate research into best practices and to communicate research and its application to practitioners is essential. It is necessary to distill lessons from both the federal government and foundation sponsored research and demonstration projects to inform the development of best practices and an integrated system of care.

Recommendations

- There is a need to increase attention to and provide resources for early childhood clinical research to inform policy. Well designed cross-domain studies are needed to define what works for whom, when, and why. Studies should include evaluation of appropriate service types, duration, and intensity.
 - There is a need to develop an early childhood service system research capacity. There is an increasing demand for rigorous studies of the organization and financing of early childhood services coupled with an analysis of performance based outcomes and quality of care measures. Because of the interdependent nature of the early childhood service delivery system, this research must span policy domains.
 - There is a need to support the National Advisory Mental Health Council Workgroup (1998) recommendation to “stimulate research on how changes in social and economic systems, policies, and laws as well as social and cultural norms may affect the prevention of mental disorders” and respond to their concerns regarding the need for research to inform decisions about the provision, cost, financing, and improvement of mental-health preventive services by:
 - expanding the NIMH program of assessment and capacity building to provide impetus to this area of research;
 - encouraging rigorous descriptive studies of variations in service financing, organization, and delivery across settings; and,
 - supporting translational research bridging the gap between research and practice.
 - There is a need to support coordinated multi-site research projects that address common research questions, employ common measures and methods, and report findings both within and across sites. Such research has the potential to make major contributions to the early childhood field. Topics such as the impact of managed care on young children and their families would benefit from this type of study. This process creates rich data sets and provides a secondary benefit of enhancing the research infrastructure by developing teams of researchers across the country working together to improve the quality of research and to develop more generalizable findings.
 - There is a need to encourage rigorous qualitative studies of variations in the financing, organization, and delivery of early childhood services across policy domains. Such studies should examine how states are using their federal funds, how they coordinate federal programs at the state level, the effectiveness of these mechanisms as well as the purposes and amounts of state supplemental early childhood funding.
 - There is a need to synthesize and disseminate findings from both federal and foundation sponsored studies on early childhood issues.
- 6.** It is important to identify champions of these efforts in the highest levels of government, the philanthropic community, and business. Leaders in the social and medical sciences must join those in other sectors of society to emphasize the importance of early childhood experience on future success in education

and in the workplace. It is crucial to communicate this message through all possible channels.

Recommendations

- There is a need to meet with members of Congress and congressional staff to discuss the importance of early childhood experience and the need for coordination of federal policies and programs across policy domains.
- There is a need to publicize the link between early childhood experience and preparation for school success in the media.

Final Thoughts

These are but a few examples of the many reforms needed to develop a fully functioning system of early childhood services and supports. There are significant resources to draw on, and there are many building blocks in place in the federal system. The research for this guide has identified enormous resources and energy dedicated to reducing risk factors for poor transitions to school. A number of federal departments including Health and Human Services, Education, Agriculture, and Labor have programs that address school readiness issues. At the federal level, efforts to develop more interagency collaboration are under way. For example, the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics is developing a set of comprehensive integrated indicators for the well being of children. There are committed and extremely capable leaders in both the public and private sectors, and the public is more interested and concerned about the linkage between early life experiences and future outcomes than ever before.

But the challenges loom large. The philosophical belief that government should intervene only in the face of parental failure limits resources and is slow to change. At the federal level, responsibility for early childhood policy is divided across a number of congressional committees. Devolution of policy making and responsibility to the state level offers unique opportunities. Long established roles are changing, and it is essential to negotiate new relationships among levels of government. Increasingly, states have greater flexibility in designing programs and delivering services. Many states are engaged in new and innovative efforts to address school readiness, and some are moving toward integrated, comprehensive service systems for young children. However, changing federal-state relationships and new arrangements for the allocation of federal resources have not benefited all young children and their families.

So what is the answer to the question, “Do federal policies adequately address the emotional and social development and school readiness of young children?” Based on the research for this guide, the answers are, “Somewhat,” “Maybe,” and “Not really.” If the question is reframed to ask, “Do federal policies taken as a whole form a system of services and supports that foster the emotional and social development necessary for success in school?” the answer is, “No, not yet.” However, by building on the experience and hard work of many individuals in the past, coupled with the energy and commitment of those who are now addressing these questions, there is reason to believe that they will.